

Text: 1 Kings 17:8-16
Theme: Advanced training at Zarephath
Minister: Iyabo Agbelusi
Service: Evening Worship
Date: 15/09/2013
Time: 6pm
Tags: Elijah; 1 Kings 17; miracles; obedience; preparation; tests; widow

Oftentimes when students leave school having written their GCSEs, they think all the hard work is over. Little do they realise how much tougher life will be for them. Upon returning to visit us in school, they often say how much easier it was to be in secondary school than going to college or university. Elijah could be said to be in secondary school in Cherith. Now we see him in God's college at Zarephath. Once Elijah made it through camp Cherith, an even more demanding time of advanced training awaited him at Zarephath.

The dried up brook was a mere beginning. God had plans for Elijah that would take him far beyond those days of isolation and meditation where life beside the brook, with birds faithfully catering his meals, was simple, uninterrupted and fairly predictable. Anyone who would be used as mightily as Elijah would be in the future must first face God's advanced training course; for Elijah, this was Zarephath. By God's grace we can hopefully learn some valuable principles from Elijah's experiences.

Names are often significant in the Bible therefore let us think of the meaning of Zarephath. Research reveals that Zarephath comes from a Hebrew verb that means, '*to melt*' or '*to smelt*'. Interestingly, in noun form it means '*crucible*'. Zarephath did prove to be a crucible for Elijah - a place designed by God to further refine the prophet and make a major difference in the remainder of his life. It was almost as if the Lord were saying to His servant, 'I first took you to Cherith to wean you away from the bright lights and public platform so that I could cut you down to size and reduce you to a man who would trust Me, regardless'. At Cherith, God began to renovate Elijah's inner man through the disciplines of solitude, silence and obscurity. However, as God moved Elijah to Zarephath, it was to do a deeper work in him. God seemed to turn up the furnace and melt him in order to reform him more exactly into the kind of person God wanted him to be - someone who could fulfil God's purposes. Often in our walk with God, we find that His preparatory tests don't stop with one or two; they multiply! As soon as we climb out of one crucible thinking 'OK, I made it thru that one', we're plunged into another one where the flame gets hotter.

Crucibles create Christlikeness. In a crucible, there is often fire which God uses to consume our dross and refine us. A crucible brings all the impurities to the surface so they can be skimmed off leaving greater purity. God, who knew what the future held for his prophet, knew the kind of strength Elijah would need to be able to stand strong in the battle ahead. God knew what kind of load Elijah would bear and that he could not afford to be a wimp. Therefore Elijah needed the advanced training pre-arranged by God for him at Zarephath. At those times we pass through the crucible God has

prepared for each of us, we may feel the fire but we need to remember Isaiah 49:16: *'we are inscribed on the palms of His Hands'*. God always knows where we are. Sometimes we forget this and at times we even feel He has forsaken us. But when those feelings of throwing the pity party begin to well up within us, let us return to God's word; *"Do not fear, I am with you; Do not anxiously look about you, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, surely I will help you. Surely I will uphold you with my righteous right hand."* (Isaiah 41:10 NASB).

God's instruction to Elijah was to go to Zarephath and stay there (1 Kings 17:9). A map of ancient Israel shows Cherith to be somewhere East of the River Jordan while Zarephath was located far to the west, on the coast of the Mediterranean - at least 100 miles from Cherith. This meant a long walk, across open and unprotected land where Elijah was a wanted man. King Ahab was looking all over for Elijah and so had put out a contract on Elijah's head, therefore Elijah had to trust God all the way on that trip. Ahab's army was searching for Elijah and he would have been on the Crimewatch TV show of his day, yet God told him to leave his hidden place of security in the wilderness, walk out in the open, through populated regions, in order to reach his destination; what a hazard! But God knew what He was doing because *He had prepared a place for Elijah*.

Verse 9 sounds like a rather humbling bit of instruction. As a Man of God, we would probably expect famous Elijah to be the one to provide for a poor widow, not the other way round. This is a reminder that often the most humbling tasks are used by God to prepare us for the higher, greater ones. Elijah responded swiftly and when he arrived, he encountered two tests - tests that we face daily as God's children.

1) Test of First Impressions

Elijah was dying of thirst as we could expect, since the brook had dried up before he left Cherith and there was a famine in the land. By the time he arrived at Zarephath in desperate need of water, he saw the widow gathering sticks. He called out to her requesting for water. As if to confirm she was the one God had sent him to, she makes a move to go and get him water then he adds a request for food.

"But she said, "As the Lord your God lives, I have no bread, only a handful of flour in the bowl and a little oil in the jar; and behold, I am gathering a few sticks that I may go in and prepare for me and my son, that we may eat it and die."" (1 Kings 17:12)

Now she stops in her tracks and confesses her lack to him - she was on her last resources and starvation was her next expectation. Surprise, surprise! The one who was supposed to cater for him is expecting to starve. Elijah probably headed for Zarephath anticipating at least a little more provision than he'd had at Cherith, yet the first impressions suggested otherwise - he might not die of thirst but maybe starvation might knock him off.

I guess each of us has experiences of being blindsided by first impressions. Years ago, when we moved to London from Nigeria as God had instructed, I expected that things would fall into place pretty easily and quickly, after all, God had said to come. I was coming from a spacious 4-bed house in Nigeria with two kids and stayed with my brother and family in a 4-bed house which was anything but spacious – he himself had four kids. Grateful for a roof over my head, I was eager to find our

own place and settle down but the houses I saw were not at all interesting or suitable. Oh how I prayed! I needed an address to be able to process schools for the kids and begin to feel settled. The situation looked like our expectations would not be met. We learnt to trust God every step of the way.

Elijah came to Zarephath and found nothing but a widow looking for sticks to build a fire, fix her last meal, and thereafter starve to death. What a let-down after an arduous journey! This links to the second test – the Test of physical impossibilities.

2) Test of Physical Impossibilities

He had walked into a situation which was from human perspectives impossible. But the good news was that he saw beyond the difficulty and handled the problem with faith, rather than fear. So he says to her in verses 13-14: *“Do not fear; go, do as you have said, but make me a little bread cake from it first and bring it out to me, and afterward you may make one for yourself and for your son. For thus says the Lord God of Israel, ‘The bowl of flour shall not be exhausted, nor shall the jar of oil be empty, until the day that the Lord sends rain on the face of the earth.’”* (1 Kings 17:13-14). The widow saw impossibilities. Elijah was determined they would not get him down; his mind was on the Lord and His word. The situation is Peter walking on the water to Jesus again - as long as his eyes were on Jesus, Peter was fine; as soon as he took his eyes off Jesus, and began to look at the circumstances and think it was all happening by his own power, Peter began to sink. How could Elijah focus on God in the situation? Because he had been to Cherith, trusted God through famine and drought - in fact he had seen proof of God’s faithfulness - he survived the dried-up brook and in obedience walked to Zarephath.

‘You can’t talk the talk if you’ve never walked the walk’, says Charles Swindoll. You cannot encourage another person to believe the improbable if you haven’t believed the impossible. Neither can you light another’s candle of hope if your own torch of faith isn’t burning. When Elijah heard about the near-empty flour jar and oil jug, his response was not to give up. His attitude said, ‘That’s no problem for God. Get in there and bake me some bread and make some for your son too.’ Then he told her why. He spoke the confident words of faith. *“The bowl of flour shall not be exhausted nor the jar of oil be empty till the day The Lord sends rain on the face of the earth”* (v14).

What a promise! The widow must have looked at Elijah in wonder and bewilderment as she heard those words. It is always a great blessing to spend time with a person of faith - someone who does not have the word *impossible* in their vocabulary. We also need to stop and ask ourselves, how we affect others - do we stir up their faith in God or depress them by looking at only negatives? God wants us to be strong-hearted and build up faith in Him. The widow heard those words from Elijah and was never the same again. Elijah modelled for her, the lesson he had learned at Cherith-faithful obedience. God said ‘Go’ and he went. Now he says ‘Go and do’ to the widow and she obeys. A person’s obedience and God’s faithfulness is a combination that leads to miracles. How wonderful it must have been for the widow to eat the miracle bread daily. God met her in the kitchen. I can almost hear them thanking God for giving them each day their daily bread, *their miracle bread*.

Note, this does not mean the widow and her son had all they’d ever wanted, but God gave all they needed. When we reach the end of our resources and God says ‘No’ to our wants but ‘Yes’ to our

needs, we are more than satisfied. This was a crossroads turning point for Elijah's preparation as a Man of God.

Four Lessons to Learn

1. God's leading is often surprising. Don't analyse it – God's ways are not ours. If God leads you to Zarephath, don't try to make sense of it.
2. The beginning days are often the hardest days; don't quit.
3. God's promises often hinge on obedience; don't ignore your part.
4. God's provisions are often just enough; don't fail to thank Him.

It is probable that most of us have gone through the crucible at some point in our lives – we've been to Cherith and walked to Zarephath. It's all part of God's plan. Remember, Jesus was a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief. To be like Him, we must enter the crucible.

God will never leave us nor forsake us, therefore He is in the crucible with us.

Amen